

A Letter From Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza

January 16, 2004

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The January 9, 2004, issue of *The Texas Catholic Herald* reported the national audit of the dioceses of the United States on compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People adopted by the United States Catholic Bishops in June, 2002. The Diocese of Galveston-Houston was audited from September 15-18, 2003, and I am pleased that we were in full compliance and received a commendation for having a sexual misconduct policy for clergy and lay personnel since October 1, 1990.

The audit report also took note of our efforts to implement the VIRTUS program, "Adults Protecting God's Children." All diocesan and parish personnel and volunteers are required to participate in this program. The Diocese does criminal background checks on all personnel and volunteers who have substantial contact with children and young people. Soon we will begin fingerprinting all clergy and lay personnel. We will continue our efforts to provide a safe environment in our parishes and schools and other institutions.

A Diocesan Review Board of highly qualified lay people has been established to assist me in evaluating allegations of sexual abuse of minors. The audit report was very pleased with the experience and professionalism of the members of this Board. A full copy of the report will be published in the next issue of the *Texas Catholic Herald*.

At this time I want to report to the Catholic people of our diocese the statistics we have provided to the John Jay College of Criminal Justice which has been commissioned by the United States Catholic Bishops to study the nature and scope of the problem of sexual abuse of minors by clergy for the last 50 years. The Diocese of Galveston-Houston fully cooperated with this study which includes the years 1950-2003. Until 1966 the Diocese of Beaumont and several counties in the Dioceses of Victoria and Tyler were included in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston.

In the past 53 years 2,285 priests (658 diocesan and 1,627 religious) and 410 permanent deacons have been assigned to the Diocese of Galveston-Houston. (The first class of permanent deacons was ordained in 1972.) Of this number there have been sustainable accusations against 22 priests, diocesan and religious, and 4 permanent deacons. This represents 0.96% of the priests and 0.98% of

the permanent deacons. The priests involved have either died, resigned from the priesthood or have been removed from active priestly ministry. The four permanent deacons also are no longer in active diaconal ministry. As you can see, less than 1% of priests or permanent deacons of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston have sexually abused minors.

The number of known victims is 46. The abuse of 43 of the victims occurred before 1988. 80% of the abuses took place in the 50's, 60's and 70's, and were reported only in the past 10 years.

Clerical sexual abuse has cost the diocese \$3.6 million, of that amount \$1.8 million was covered by insurance and insurance reserves. No money has been taken from restricted or designated funds, or from the annual Diocesan Services Fund (DSF) or from the Diocesan Capital Campaign: Celebrating Our Faith, to pay this expense. Accumulated diocesan reserves were used for costs not covered by insurance. Included in the costs is counseling provided to victims and their families.

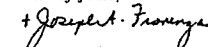
The report that I am giving to you is a very sad and tragic part of the 156 year history of our diocese. If there had been only one victim and one priest perpetrator to report, it would still be a horrible and shameful story. With the deepest sorrow in my heart, I apologize to all victims and their families for the pain and suffering they have endured from priests and permanent deacons, and I daily pray for their healing.

I want to assure you that the Diocese of Galveston-Houston is fully committed to preventing sexual abuse of minors by our clergy and lay personnel. We will cooperate with civil authorities, all organizations and institutions to eliminate this scourge from our society.

The overwhelming majority of our priests and permanent deacons are faithful servants of the gospel and dedicated ministers of the Church. As ministers of God's Word and Sacraments, they only want to serve your spiritual and religious needs. I know that you truly love and appreciate them and will not let the present crisis lessen your fidelity to God and the Church, or your respect for the priesthood and permanent diaconate.

During these difficult, trying and purifying times, let us pray that the Church will be more clearly seen as the sacrament of Christ in the world and His instrument of salvation.

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Joseph A. Fiorenza
Bishop of Galveston-Houston

Top Vatican official says 2004 could be good year for ecumenism

VATICAN CITY (CNS)—While new tensions have arisen in some of the Catholic Church's dialogues with other churches and some old sore points have yet to be resolved, 2004 could be a very good year for ecumenism, said Cardinal Walter Kasper.

"There are very hopeful signs from Moscow," Cardinal Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, told Catholic News Service on the eve of the Jan. 18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

While official contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church have continued, the relationship has remained extremely tense since the post-communist restoration of Catholic dioceses in the lands of the former Soviet Union.

Partly due to the dispute with the Russian Orthodox, the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue commission has not met since 2000.

But Cardinal Kasper said Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the Istanbul-based spiritual leader of the Orthodox churches, has named a new Orthodox co-president of the dialogue and the commission's coordinating committee should be able to meet in 2004 to plan the next joint meeting.

Cardinal Kasper said one of the biggest ecumenical events in 2004 would be the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's document on ecumenism.

In November, the Vatican will host a conference with the heads of the ecumenical commissions of national bishops' conferences and Eastern Catholic synods and representatives of the Christian communities in dialogue with the Catholic Church.

The gathering of about 300 people will focus on what has been accomplished in the past 40 years and what the focus for the future should be, the cardinal said.

Cardinal Kasper said there also were signs of hope in Catholic-Anglican relations, although the November ordination of an openly gay bishop raised serious questions about doctrinal differences.

And while the Anglican Communion struggles to maintain its own unity following the ordination, the head of the Anglican Communion has asked for Roman Catholic input into possible solutions.

"The network of relations between our churches is very tight," the cardinal said. "If there are problems, we will help them. We are not trying to interfere, but we will help when asked."

The cardinal and Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury announced in December that a panel of Anglican and Catholic experts would examine questions about authority in the church and structures of church unity in the wake of the controversial ordination.

"This is a new form of solidarity," Cardinal Kasper said of the joint study. "If they have problems, we suffer too."

In his address to the November plenary meeting of his council, the cardinal said that a lack of consensus within a church can "obstruct and, at times, impede the attainment of ecumenical consensus 'externally' and could lead to a paralysis in ecumenism and even to its impotence." □



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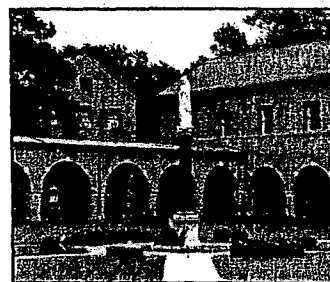
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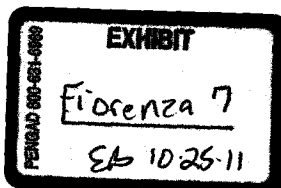
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